

A LESSON IN DISCIPLESHIP
Genesis 32: 22-31; Matthew 14: 13-21
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • August 2, 2020
by Pat Berger

"Now when Jesus heard this . . ." -- what Jesus had heard was that John the Baptizer had been beheaded. Any of us, too, might have headed to a deserted place to be alone. It is unlikely that any of us would then have been followed by ". . . about 5000 men, besides women and children." That would certainly take the "deserted" right out of the place where Jesus had gone. Another translation, which sounds more like it might fit here, is desolate. Much of the geography where Jesus was could have been described as desolate, and I think that Jesus' soul also might have been desolate, on hearing of the violent death of his friend who was also probably his cousin.

Jesus tried to get away, to be alone, but that didn't work. He saw the people and he might have liked to send them away; rather, he "felt compassion" and he "cured their sick." (Wouldn't we hope that the disciples were taking notes?!) (And likely they would wish that we were, too . . .) Jesus would like to have had some alone time, and yet his calling was stronger than that. And then evening came. "It's late and we're out in the middle of nowhere," the disciples said to Jesus. "Send these folks away to get themselves some food." And maybe, send them away so that we can get ourselves some food, too. Think about the number of times that the disciples want challenges to go away, and Jesus has the idea that the disciples are capable of more. This time was not different. And this time, Jesus said: no. You feed them, he said. Don't always ask me to do something; do your part of this work; I need your efforts; I am counting on you. But, but, but, they must have said. Five loaves, two fish, 5000 men and no doubt the women and children will want to eat too. Bring the food to me, Jesus said. (I try to envision what he might have looked like if he were rolling his eyes and having compassion on his disciples at the same time . . .) He blessed and broke the bread (the fish seem to have disappeared), and gave the bread back to the disciples to give to the people. Notice that Jesus did not feed the 5000 plus; the disciples fed them. They fed, and each one had enough, AND each disciple brought back a basket of leftovers! Can you imagine the feeling of blessing that the disciples must have known after that feeding, not to speak of those who ate? There clearly wasn't enough -- and then there was plenty. They think they can't -- and then they do. This being a disciple wasn't always going to be neat and orderly, and it was going to have its moments. One commentator wrote, "Discipleship is rarely tidy or convenient. What you will be asked to live -- and when -- may just be a miracle itself."

It could be that this is a miracle story, but it isn't written that way by Matthew. Think of other miracle stories. In this one, we don't read of people being amazed; no

one asks, who is this?; there is no report of new believers; and we aren't told that Jesus' fame spread throughout the region. None of that is in Matthew's account. What we have is a story of compassion, a story of feeding hungry people -- a story that has been primary in the church ever since. One of the commentators wrote this: "Jesus said, "The question, What did you do in the face of human hunger?, would be on the final exam."

How are we to make sense of this story? There are explanations that we have all heard: people had sandwiches in their pockets and they were willing to share when they saw that the disciples were trying to feed everyone. That wouldn't have been unusual at the time, and that may have been what happened; there is no way for us to know. We can't really explain what happened that day, which likely means that the story really happened, and that it tells us more about Jesus and God than it does about food, and that it isn't about being able to explain it. Something more is going on here. It was time for food, and no one had announced that those whose last names began with A through F ought to bring salads etcetera etcetera, and Jesus didn't say, time to go home! He knew that the crowd was hungry for more than their daily bread.

And so, he had the disciples feed the crowd. They ate, and they learned. This God about whom Jesus taught them cared about their very human needs in addition to their spiritual needs. From at least the time when the Hebrew people wandered in the desert, this God had seen to their feeding -- and not only had seen to it, but had seen to it abundantly, with plenty left over. The disciples didn't ask anyone on that day who they believed in or if they had been behaving; they simply fed: everyone, including women and children, as much as each one wanted. Jesus taught about God Who Keeps on Caring.

That God is the One about whom Jacob learned again in today's verses, too. This summer, we have heard Jacob's story since before he was born. God had blessed Jacob and he had been . . . well, he had been pretty much a scoundrel. Jacob's name means "heel" and, to this point, he had pretty much acted like a heel. Today we read about a wrestling match, and a wrestling match is where we began with Jacob, before he was born! Since then, we have read as he stole his brother's birthright, as his father blessed him rather than Esau, and then the next event and then the next. In the verses leading up to today's reading, he had decided to head back to his father's land, and he knew this would mean that he had to face Esau. This was a scary proposition. He sent money ahead, and he sent gifts. Still, maybe not enough; in earlier verses, we would have read that Esau was coming, after all, with an army of 400 men. At the beginning of our verses, Jacob sent his wives and servants and eleven sons, not to mention his daughter, and all of his belongings -- he sent all of this ahead, perhaps to form a shield, or perhaps because he thought maybe his brother would be more polite because the women and children were there.

Then Jacob was alone. But not for long. As he stood alone, suddenly he was in a wrestling match with a man -- or, as it turns out, with our God Who Keeps On Caring. They wrestled until daybreak; Jacob's hip was put out of joint; and then the man/angel/God let Jacob go. Only: Jacob wouldn't go. First, he demanded a blessing. Instead, God changed Jacob's name, to Israel. One whose name was Israel, which means "striving with God and prevailing," might accomplish a fair amount more for the Kingdom than one whose name was "heel."

"What kind of God is it," asked one commentator, "who will get into a nighttime brawl with a mortal and come out no better than even? From the perspective of spirituality, the answer is: the kind of God we need." The disciples might have asked a similar question of Jesus: what kind of Man of God is it who tells us to feed a huge crowd with five loaves and two fish? And the answer would be, the kind of Jesus that they needed and that we need. In fact, the disciples said that they had nothing but five loaves and two fish -- they had nothing. Sometimes, we, some of today's disciples, do the same. We have so little, we are so little; how can we grow the Kingdom?

AND: our names have been changed, too. Each one receives the name "Christian" at his or her baptism. David Lose writes that in baptism we, "have God's promise to regard and treat [us] always as God's own beloved children, even as God's own Beloved Child, [the Christ,] and that is who we are." As Jacob did and as those who listened to Jesus that day would, we have entered into a new future. God Who Keeps On Caring has called each one of us to life and to love and to abundance and to grace. We are the ones God needs to share the Good News now, the news of healing and helping and new life. We take away from what can be done in the Kingdom when we think we haven't enough, or aren't enough -- when we think we have nothing. When we act as if we have nothing, then Jesus really has nothing with which to feed the hungry or house the homeless, or -- if we can even imagine -- bring peace in various places in our world. Small amounts added together add up to larger amounts; we must do our part. Plymouth shared its \$1000 check from the Presbytery with three agencies helping people to get through the COVID-19 virus; if you want a thrilling experience, get onto the Presbytery website and watch the video of what many of the other churches did with their \$1000 checks. We shared that others might buy food; now, because our name is "Christian," let us use this lesson in discipleship and go out to share something more: to share the food that is the Good News.

Let us pray.

